

# **ANOTHER WAY TO LIVE**



**experiencing  
intentional  
community**

**JAMES S. BEST**

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Theology Library  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
AT CLAREMONT  
California

*About the Author*/Jim Best has spent much of his life in the company of publications, two decades of it in books, another decade with a magazine, off and on with newspapers. He was with Harper & Brothers (now Harper & Row) the greater part of this period; the Fellowship of Reconciliation took the second largest chunk of his working experience.

Of his three loves: the printed word, the care and nurture of a family, and living in community, he speaks here of the last-named. The second love is reflected in four children, now grown—Tina, Larry, Carolyn and Jonathan Best—and a faithful partner, Ruth Dreamdigger.

Jim has been a member of four Friends meetings: Nashville, Tenn.; Fifteenth Street, New York City; Rockland Meeting, New York State; and Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting. As this pamphlet is published he has reached his second majority, 65, but with no intention whatever of "retiring."

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*May we look upon our treasures, the furniture of our houses, and our garments, and try whether the seeds of war have nourishment in these our possessions.*

JOHN WOOLMAN

*In reference to our war dominated economy: This is not a way of life at all. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron. Is there no other way the world may live?*

DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER

*If you are not going to be part of the solution, you are part of the problem.*

ELDRIDGE CLEAVER

*The world is now too dangerous for anything short of Utopia.*

JOHN R. PLATT



ANOTHER WAY TO LIVE, and the way I have chosen for my latter years, is in community. But since the word "community" means so many different things to so many people, let me try to define it at the outset. It is a hard word to deal with since it has long since escaped from dictionary definitions into the *lingua franca* of the era. For example: a couple or a family may have a "community" of interests. A shopping center or a trade area is a community. So is a postal, election, or school district.

Parker Palmer, a sociologist drawing upon contemporary experience and thought, has made some excellent working definitions of community in his Pendle Hill pamphlet, *A Place Called Community*. But I, writing more out of personal experience than theory, want to confine my focus to a particular kind of community often described as "intentional," as opposed to those "natural" communities which are the product of social "accident." Thus, in this pamphlet I will, in almost all cases, be implying the word "intentional" whenever I use the word community.

In the West we have long felt sheltered by the Community of Faith. But a true community of faith involves a community of sharing. We may forget that the Book of Acts tells that the Christians held "all things in common." The Latin word "communitas" recognized this and later the word "communism" emerged to indicate a state of social organization that Karl Marx was quick to put to use in his Manifesto of a realized Utopia. The nineteenth century in the United States

saw perhaps the richest flowering in Christendom of a wide variety of communistic societies.

No one who reads the public prints today needs be told that small, more or less intimate communities, often called "communes" are a hallmark of the alternate culture in America and many other countries. But, to get around the seemingly inescapable distortion found in reporting on communes in newspapers, magazines and TV, we need to make a few clear distinctions between the type of communities we are talking about.

A directory of alternative communities and communes in the United States and Canada lists, classifies, and describes 320 communities\*. But other lists and "guesstimates" range all the way from 2000 to 3000!

I would merely point out that by far the largest category consists of those formed on the land with the ostensible purpose of providing a model, in microcosm, of the new society of the future. They can be characterized by (a) relative physical isolation (b) effort to be self-sufficient (c) counter-culture life style, either careless of or hostile to conventional standards (d) general egalitarian and libertarian philosophy, with no distinction between age and sex roles, and shunning hierarchical models.

Another important category, often overlapping the above, is that of the religious communities, which may vary all the way from monastic types, with emphasis on celibacy, to family-oriented communities, which may include group marriage. Many in both groups use the term New Age or similar label, an agreed-upon blanket term which indicates that they do, in truth, think of themselves as already in the New Society, even if only symbolically.

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\*Available from School of Living, PO Box 3233, York, Pa. 17402.

## *Antecedents*

Quite a number of my friends, and those of Ruth, my wife for 27 years, had gone into communities of these kinds, so that we realized, beyond the need to explore personally, their attractiveness and their limitations for us. I speak here principally of only one of these communities.

Since adolescence I, for one, have always had on the margins of my thought the need to make a personal commitment to a society that would outlast me. In envisioning this I had initially, with many others, a vision of a Kingdom of God brought down somehow to twentieth Century America. The Social Gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch gripped me hard in my twenties. Such a transformation of society—everywhere—seemed as much a reality as a dream in those decades between the two World Wars.

Then, the war over, I heard a friend talk about an “intentional” community he and others were building 30 miles from New York City. I threw myself into plans—and seemingly endless meetings—for Skyview Acres, which in time became a reality for forty-four families.

Here I sought community, not as an end, but as a means. But at Skyview Acres it turned out to be neither, but rather an experience. My earlier life had, I thought, prepared me for living in community, but the reality was different.

Skyview Acres, my home for twenty-four years, was a limited sanctuary after my ten hours of work and commuting each day, 5 days a week. About as minimal as any keeping-up-with-the-Joneses neighborhood could be, it was a rich and warm seedbed for the nurture of four very individual souls—our children. It was a place of ailing dishwashers, never-quite-healed wounded relationships, a staging ground for protest meetings and actions, often a place of ease for certain kinds of



bursting the seams of the old? For this purpose so many came to Stone House, the original twenty-roomed edifice, that its resident community found itself, on weekends, a kind of crash-pad for transients. Thus an orientation weekend evolved, and Ruth and I availed ourselves of a convenient one that summer.

Of a late Friday afternoon tote bags and sleeping bags, attached to people of all ages, began appearing at the doors of Stone House. A community meal of tasty beans and rice, homebaked wheat bread, tossed salad, gingerbread and cocoa, prepared on a huge institutional stove in a cavernous basement, fed us all at a long, rickety table. Each was gently admonished to wash his/her own cups and plates.

I do not remember much of the information that was thrust at me those three days. but the feeling "this really is *another* way of life" became clearer and clearer. People were here, not to savour the novelty and creativity of *just* living in community. They were here—for the most part it seemed—as a necessary discipline to change the world. True, they talked "revolution," but never the purely political revolution of conspiracy and terror built into a system that condones violence. Always the non-violence of peaceful persuasion, of conscientization\*, even of street theatre and confrontation—but always principled, and rooted in Jesus, Gandhi and Tolstoi.

I went back, quickly typed up an article "They Are Living the Revolution Now," for *Fellowship*, the magazine I then edited (my final issue it turned out). Ruth and I didn't have long midnight talks about the impending change, but as we went about our business we referred very frequently to an inner decision each had made.

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liberal comrades in the struggle. It was a piece of God's tarnished but often still shining world.

But it was also a place of high taxes, harassed and sometimes angry neighbors, steadily mounting piles of scarcely disposable goods. It was a burial ground for dear dreams of what an intentional community might mean, a gradual dimming of the once-bright hope of cooperative endeavor.

When founded, our charter called for common ownership of land. But banks insisted that if we wanted their help we must vest title in each individual family. Many meetings threshed out formulas for cost-assessing our houses (labor, dollar devaluation, improvements, etc.) in case any member having to leave might be tempted to put his house on the market. But, in the end, those who left *did* put their homes and land on the market—to appreciations in value of hundreds, even a thousand percent, of original dollar cost!

Tina, our eldest child, had married and moved away. Larry, the next, had finished his CO commitments in Boston, and had become a surveyor and boat builder. Carolyn, graduate of a free school in the neighborhood, had been accepted at Goddard, but was restless there. Jonathan had still a year to run at Skunk Hollow school.

### *A New Kind of Community*

A real, or at least a "realer" community continued to beckon. In Philadelphia, A Quaker Action Group, which had always fascinated Ruth and me, had merged most of its membership and added many more in a Movement for a New Society, locally called a Life Center in the "university city" area of West Philadelphia.

MNS, as we shall henceforth refer to it, had much to recommend it on paper, and also in the round, as we were soon to find out in terms of our needs and visions in the early '70's.

The bedrock on which it was founded was the belief that our war-making, profit-prone, consumption-gorged and violence-infected society is on its last legs. There is still time, they say to build a peoples' structure sturdy enough to hold the weight of public peace and order, if erected within and alongside the crumbling shapes we see about us.

This may easily seem pretty lofty thinking and feeling for two suburbanites well past mid-life who, in most circles, would be toying with thoughts of "retirement." But now a certain kind of freedom beckoned. The nest we had furnished, out of which we had sent forth our little brood, was now paid for, and could be left behind. Neighbors were good, yes, but their sights for community had been lowered so much the past twenty-odd years that we could not find much to line up with our own. The Vietnam war had ended; so had our six-year-long vigil at the neighborhood corner. The seasons outside our doors, lovely as always, could be enjoyed anywhere. We did not need to own those reddening dogwoods, those yellow ash and golden-orange maple leaves. There was an "unlived" life out there. Why not go in search of it?

West Philadelphia, visited on an orientation weekend the summer of 1973, was no "heaven" in comparison to our own rolling two-and-a-half acres of Skyview. The gracious old houses that lined the streets behind rows of ancient sycamores were as often falling down as lovingly preserved. But life teemed in them. Most had been altered little since they were built around the turn of the century.

The generally youthful members of MNS/Life Center took certain of these houses in a ten block area as they found them, whether with the sturdy, original, still-functioning plumbing in bathroom and kitchen, or the gussied-up pastel tile and gleaming cabinets of the 50's. All had spacious, airy bedrooms, much "common" space, endless hallways.

Who would not want to take a peek at this new society,



bursting the seams of the old? For this purpose so many came to Stone House, the original twenty-roomed edifice, that its resident community found itself, on weekends, a kind of crash-pad for transients. Thus an orientation weekend evolved, and Ruth and I availed ourselves of a convenient one that summer.

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## *Moving into a New Society*

A phone call precipitated the decision—made it an action. Lois Bye from Urban Developers realty was saying that the house next to Stone House had become available, and at a very attractive price. That weekend I was flying to Pittsburgh to visit an aged aunt. I could return via Philadelphia. I did, Ruth driving down from New York to meet me at the airport. We had a key to the house, spread our sleeping bags on the floor, looked around next morning. We liked what we saw—a much lived-in but not abused brick three-story half-duplex on the corner—four very large bedrooms—at least one divisible. A huge parlor with a fireplace on the second floor. Seemed sound, was full of light. We took it, signing the binder that very day.

I think neither of us has regretted that seemingly hasty decision, which was really many years in the making. I know that I, despite some misgivings about the traffic light beneath my window, never have. I dislike facile use of the term “hand of God,” but for those of you who are that comfortable with the deity, I would say that a hand not our own could be seen in this push into the future.

The details are inconsequential. The biggest U-haul truck we could get was loaded to the gunnels with the contents of our suburban house. Most of our furnishings were used, some third-hand! Ruth and daughter Carolyn drove ahead with luggage, plants, and two cats. I followed with Larry, Jonathan and all the rest.

It was the hottest work I can remember, unloading that scorching Labor Day weekend. We ate our first meal at nearby Stone House. But by the time that weekend ended, we had substituted a new, extended family for the old nuclear family. Larry, Carolyn and Jonathan returned to more familiar scenes.

Junko from Japan and Mark from Chappaqua helped Ruth

and me form the new family and at once the four of us began laying out the kitchen, planning meals, painting and refurbishing rooms, in a state of great excitement. Our first rules, formulated at Sunday evening house meetings, were simple in the extreme. Applicants for residence would talk it all out—at several sessions; they would be applicants only if they felt comfortable after that, and if they understood the purpose and commitment of MNS. We would eat and live as simply and as “low on the food chain” as good nutrition would permit, we would share equally in every task, both in work and costs. We would make all decisions by consensus.

Later, modifications and refinements set in. A “clearness” process, comfortable and thorough enough to satisfy both individual and group, emerged, making it possible to air discomforts and grievances, and to leave as painlessly as possible if separation were indicated. Uncleanliness, the bugaboo of so many communal situations, early raised its head as an obstacle to a settled state of trust and acceptance. It and its curiously related cousin, anger, were dealt with in our house in “contracts” or agreements worked out by the house-holders.

Hodaka, a name that Junko contributed to our house and to which we all enthusiastically agreed, was not in community alone. Far from it! There were 13 other houses when I came, 19 when I left four years later. They tended to function almost as a unit, while keeping the identity of each clear. These 19 are the houses comprising the Life Center. Here I refer mostly to Hodaka, but occasionally I will extrapolate from this example, sometimes referring to developments in all the houses, typified by what happened at Hodaka.

We did many things together. Some events, such as the monthly “town meeting” were planned; others were spontaneous. Our community was barely together by Thanksgiving time, with guests from old world families joining our new

household, when, in the midst of dinner preparations, we heard sounds of "uncanned" music outside the door. A violin and two guitars provided melody and rhythm for several dozen smiling visitors. "Come out for a square dance," they called, and between streetside and lawn edge we did a Virginia Reel with much laughing and bouncing. The dancers went on to other houses, not all of them belonging to the Life Center.

On Christmas Day children and adults from many houses crafted their own decorations, and came together for a procession to nearby Clark Park, converging on a leafless tree which we made beautiful again, singing carols roundabout. Several years later a large group gathered at neighboring Ananda Marga Center to welcome the return of the sun in a pre-Christmas non-sectarian salute to the Winter Solstice, spending the night together in a celebration that merged many traditions, greeting the sun on a cold rooftop.

From the beginning Hodaka became a much-used center for all manner of enterprises: training programs in non-violence, concerned meetings about larger community housing, consciousness-raising for women's groups, parties to send off the many "transnational" folk who come through the Life Center, etc. With Ruth and me, and now just Ruth, as the core, four different constellations of people have constituted the community.

But it is not the residential communities, but the "collectives" that constitute the *real* core of the movement. Here are some from a current list (they keep changing and expanding all the time): "The Fatted Sprout" a food service collective; the feminist collective; "Men Against Patriarchy"; a network service collective; a "macro-analysis" collective; the transnational collective; the life center collective; "Seeds for Change," a training collective; "Wonderful Older Women," etc. As is evident, they represent Quaker-like "concerns" that sometimes start with one individual, spreading to operational,



outreach, and strategic concerns of a growing and constantly changing movement.

In these collectives the real work for social changes takes place. One of the most ambitious, in terms of capital investment—was the Community Associates Printing Collective, to which I, together with ten others at different times, gave two hardworking years. For four years we printed books, pamphlets, newsletters, posters, and many other things, not only for “the movement” but for our neighbors bordering on busy Baltimore Avenue. Insoluble problems with equipment, and difficulties in mounting an adequate training program while maintaining excellence, eventually made it necessary to lay it down, but we all learned a great deal about worker-managed enterprises designed for service rather than profit.

But most collectives provide no substantial income to MNS community folk, nor are they expected to do so. When the idea of a social change community emerged in 1970 and subsequent years, it was the result of a longish period of musings and discussions by activists from A Quaker Action Group: Berit and George Lakey, Lillian and George Willoughby, Dick and Phyllis Taylor, Ross and Dorothy Flanagan, Larry and Vi Scott. The campaigns put on by AQAG, designed to be democratically decided and sensitively executed, were found to involve an inordinate amount of time by staff. And those who simply made out checks to AQAG out of “conscience” were not really participants. Holding down 9-5 jobs, their commitments were necessarily marginal. It seemed time to blur the distinctions between activists and supporters and MNS evolved as one way.

Thus developed the never imposed, but clearly implied, requirement that those who joined MNS/Life Center communities seek work that would not commit them to more than three days a week. The other four days, it was then thought—and has since been borne out in practice—are needed for a

five-way division of time and energy: (1) obligations to the resident community (2) tasks in the social change collective (3) group and individual study of the world scene to be changed (4) socializing and recreation, and (5) personal growth.

## *Reflections*

Regimented? Never seemed so to me. Each of the five time-divisions caught me up in an equation of freedom-cum-commitment that released, rather than regimented, my time. Making Hodaka a fulfilling, homey place to live in was usually a joy, never a duty. I found working in the macro-analysis collective more challenging than any leisure time college seminar could ever have been. The study was gladly undertaken, on the whole, as a part of my collective work, and it never failed to stretch my mind. There were frequent minor celebrations with much singing, dancing, and "light and lively" games. Even the meetings were fun. As for personal growth, most houses made it plain to members that they were expected to make their own provisions for their "private lives," and the conflicts arising therefrom. Re-evaluation counseling, a peer-counseling system, is often used to help individuals deal with all that may impede their personal growth. Conflict resolution skills of all kinds have reached a very high level of development at the Life Center.

Personal freedom? Well, no longer being head of a household, I found it "heady." In not-far-off suburbia Ruth and I had always shared a "master bedroom." Here we each had a large private sitting-sleeping room of our own. Yes, I made most of my friends within the community, but met folks in the neighborhood in a variety of ways, and kept up my Quaker meeting connections in center city. If I experienced a "set-apart" life, I mostly gloried in it, only rarely thinking about its relative insularity.

Utopian? Well, that needs explication. In macro-analysis we studied so-called utopian visions of a better world—a realizable world, a needed world in which human personality could be at home. But doctrinaire pie-in-the-sky utopianism? I don't think so. "Where there is no vision the people perish," Isaiah told us more than two thousand years ago, and it is possibly more true today than then.

What the Movement for a New Society is largely about is how we get from here to there. Our Western-Christian-Quaker vision lays upon us, I believe, the need to live today as if the "kingdom of heaven" were already here. It is a challenge worthy of every ounce of thought and devotion, especially to those who want to achieve simplicity without giving up any wealth.

Perfect? In no way. Our lives, in whatever societal setting, are flawed and caught between hope and realization, between easy short-term goals and harder long-term ones. But life in community—the more intentional for me the better—in a small society that strives to actualize itself, gives me more chance of self-actualization than I would have if I were buried in the mass society.

### *Community as Family*

As I have said, when we have totaled up the pluses and deducted the minuses, living in community is on balance a great learning experience—one that never ends. And I therefore feel that, because I am sharing here four crucial years in my life, I ought to try to sort out something of what I learned in addition to just a few observations and comments for those who may be travelling the same way. I think I have an obligation not to generalize for insufficient evidence, nor from a too individual reaction, but just to lay it out as it seems best.

Among the questions most frequently asked and yet most



difficult to answer are those that concern the place of marriage, family life, and the nurture of children. But before I speak to these questions, let me try to paint a somewhat broader picture then just of the Life Center, which may or may not be at all typical.

There are a number of areas in which conventional life and the "life of the future" come into tension in community. One is the insufficiency of the nuclear family as the center of nurture and growth. Realizing and experiencing this, those who search for change in community may be expected to challenge every person, married or single, on his or her sex role.

No marriage, in my experience, that has honestly faced the necessity for change in society and in personal relationships, especially in the area of sex roles, need fear for its "life" in community. But you will need to choose your community carefully. Feminism, in my view, is the biggest challenge to marriage in most social change communities. One of the most persistent questions asked in clearing an individual into a Life Center house or collective is "Where do you stand on the woman's issue?"

While perhaps the Life Center is emerging from a phase in which sexuality has received more than its due emphasis, I think that it has rightly perceived that the essential root of change and the key to insight and moving on all the issues, is "What is your role for women?" This emphasis seems at present to attract many strong and independent women, some of whom have shed their husbands. That they find support from their sisters for their views and growing unease, does indeed throw the gauntlet down before males of all ages. Thus, at least in the Life Center, good men's groups have emerged, too, going beyond mere knee-jerk responses.

Sexuality, which some understand as nothing more than acknowledgement of our physical nature, and others as over-emphasis or fixation, emerges in other forms, too. One area is



concern about the rights of homosexuals, even of the right of each person to ask "what balance of male vis-a-vis female tendencies lie within?" One may indeed conclude (as I have on occasion) that "gay rights" thus become magnified in the spectrum of the other isms such as racism, classism and ageism, to name but a few. But I have been willing to put it down to growing pains.

Sexuality, seen as an expression of affection (including the ritual hug) is a ridiculous bugaboo that gets in the eye of the critic of those communities spelled "communes," yet it must be dealt with. When one considers a whole society, troubled with high-school-age out-of-wedlock mothers, steadily rising divorce rates, the pornographic explosion, rape, and personal abuse, even when one thinks of the furtive wife-swapping of "respectable" communities, one wonders how the myth of sexual license in the new communities ever took root. I took no surveys at Life Center, but even keeping my eyes and ears halfway open, observed no "free love" along the gaudier lines. If it matters, I would hazard a guess that there is more celibacy to be found among agents of change in their twenties than in any cross-section group in the same age range.

The family as we know it now, evolving from a self-contained and self-nourishing center of life in the nineteenth century, has a number of characteristics we must preserve in this new age. But they must be extended and augmented rather than contracted, and this means drastic and sometimes painful change. Single parents have come to the Life Center, for example, and have more or less successfully shared their burdens and joys with a new family called community. In houses where children are an important part (and there were only five out of twenty in 1977) the whole house usually participates in Parent Effectiveness Training, a system of re-education.

## *“Social Security” in Community*

Still in process and probably not to be perfected for another generation is the tougher question of “whole community” protection of individuals from the hazards of life. Income sharing is a way to approach the problem, simply because as a radical solution it shows a direction, rather than a method ready for acceptance now. Is a child alienated from his peers in school? Are there no means in the community to provide college education for the maturing child? Are members of a family hurt in an auto accident? Does sudden illness strike? (A case of cancer in a middle-aged parent is a present example.) Might there be a dependent grandparent? Or, more likely, an older member of an action community who wants to remain active though limited by age? In our particular setup, such questions often came up, usually in the context of “what are the hallmarks of a caring community?”

No final or really satisfactory answers emerged. But much thinking was taking place around such core thoughts as “Must we look solely to state financed and controlled social security or must we create a climate of our own?” Or “Is this an occasion for self-taxation (or its corollary, income sharing) as an expression of mutual help?” Put another way, “Are our communities only for the young and eager or should they be multi-generational, in which age and sex roles are balanced?” A “core community” group at Life Center began emerging in the late seventies to deal with these thoughts and vexing questions. It grew from the conviction that communities of change are long-term things, and must have an expectancy of continuity built into them, or suffer the fate of so many short-lived experiments.

My personal testimony is that my four years in this period of rapid growth in new consciousness opened all kinds of vistas. Ruth and I found ourselves well over the median age-range,

which in many another social situation would have surely meant a measure of isolation and some alienation.

As I have said, I think the ways are clearer for a woman in the midst of fundamental change of all kinds. Her sisters are all about her, often in comparable situations. There is an air of "we can do anything that has to be done." There were, early on, many kinds of feminist collectives and study groups. But the most significant, it seemed to me, was an age and sex defined group calling itself "Wonderful Older Women" (WOW).

WOW is a bright light in the MNS/Life Center structure these days. Its half-dozen or more mid-life women meet weekly to share thoughts and feelings, write pamphlets together, do street theatre and even put on a radio program. But what is perhaps more important, they give each other much personal support in a stretching and occasionally "downing" experience. Alas, no comparable group exists for men, and I was more than a little frustrated in trying to start one. Details are, again, beyond the scope of this study.

I would rather not generalize further on possible growing edges in the search for a family surrogate in community. The transition from here (meaning our rigid and invalidating family "system") to there (suggesting the "small society" that fosters true growth) is strewn with blocks and boulders. But there are paths between.

### *Simplification of Life*

Living in a new kind of residential setting has myriad openings for experimenting with the simplification of life. To the many Quakers who have come and who still come to the Life Center, simplicity has an almost parochial sound and context. To older folk it may suggest a kind of puritan turning to "voluntary poverty," with overtones of denial and stoicism.



But although in a sense there may be a harking back to the starker life of the American frontier (cf. *Walden*) there is a new exuberance in the return to almost forgotten styles of inventiveness and adaptation that turns away from reliance on gadgets and wasteful mechanization. Many are catalogued and described in *Taking Charge*, a new AFSC paperback.

I have referred in passing to the used furniture we brought with us from New York. It was "right in style" in West Philadelphia. Yet gaiety, attention to color and design, even comfort of the less "plushy" sort, are never absent from the scene. We found, early on, that much of real value and even beauty can be garnered from the sidewalks of our "throw-away" society. Bright and serviceable clothing, furniture and utensils turn up regularly in the least likely places. I have two excellent pairs of slacks salvaged from the gutter that I am not ashamed to wear anywhere. Sturdy settees, even a working refrigerator came from curbside, which in a city is a once-a-week elongated city dump.

Individually owned cars are a rarity, but, when they exist are generally shared as need arises. There is still work to be done in "socializing" costly and seemingly senseless insurance regulations. There need be only one ice cream freezer for a dozen houses, one washer for every four to six houses, very few lawnmowers, perhaps no dishwashers at all! The communal stockpiling of common medicines and health aids is taken for granted. For a while, a clothing exchange called a "free store" provided multiple use of well made garments. No one need look or feel ill dressed.

I have again extrapolated observations on community from a highly personal experience, though I hope not a narrow one. In the area of simplicity, I think one can say on behalf of all new age communities, that it is never for the sake alone of simplifying life but, more broadly, of making a start on the assumption that America, by and large, is much more a part of

the problem than of the solution, in world terms. That is, that the consumption of over thirty percent of the world's resources by six per cent of the world's population must end at some point, if the whole human enterprise itself is not to end.

## *Decisions and Privacy*

"Yes," critics, explorers, and students of community life will say, "we acknowledge that the larger social issues of life sometimes overwhelm us as we 'make do' in the fragmented, open society of present-day capitalism. We can follow quite well your argument and accept at least some of the evidence you offer us that intentional communities help us confront them. But we ourselves couldn't do it, you know. Even if we sold a lot of our possessions, set aside many dear, but expensive customs, and reordered some of our lives' priorities, we simply couldn't stand all those meetings, that prying into the details of each other's lives, the haggling over nitty-gritty minutiae, etc. How do *you* stand it?"

To this imaginary (but I think not overdrawn) comment, I would concede that, in the decision-making process, we touch a difficult and tender issue. It is true that living in community (and I have heard many references to this in communities other than my own) makes new demands on the forbearance, flexibility, and individuality of all of its members.

For those who have experienced the consensus process in the Friends meeting for business, I would like to point to it and beyond it. To it, because the MNS/Life Center emerged from this prototype. Beyond it, because quite a lot of adaptations and refinements have taken place in the seven years the movement has been going. Even so, the Friends meeting method is only a rough approximation of how people living in close community order their lives.

How can I make vivid some of the ways in which this

process works? Maybe the best method would be to take you, the reader, into a typical meeting, if such there be, for all are different. I shall choose a house meeting, rather than a collective or a "network" (larger community) meeting, as it is here that the knottiest problems are tackled.

Picture, then, a living room filled with seven adults of both sexes and all ages. Often spurning chairs and sofas, they sit in a circle on cushions placed on the floor. They have probably just come from dinner, the one community meal when all are present.

A facilitator (as distinguished from moderator or clerk) has already prepared a wall or large clipboard chart with the proposed agenda. Each house member has had a chance to put down items for the agenda earlier. But the facilitator goes over the list item by item to see if more should be taken up. A time in minutes is assigned to each item.

This is the rough framework for getting everything out that needs deciding. Sample items: John (who wants to be a member); a New Treasurer (usually rotated every three months); Retreat (plans for getting away to help members share on a deeper level, or have fun); Food Storage (a problem about space and spoilage); Assessment for Child Care (about helping other houses); Evaluation. The meeting begins with light and recent reminiscences called excitement sharing, pauses midway for some "Light and Lively" games, may end with singing or at least a group hug.

Does it sound folksy and clubby? Don't be deceived. Hard and difficult matters are dealt with in these sessions, but with a minimum of hurt to participants. Each person always feels deeply involved, and, when things go well, somehow satisfied that his "family" is an extension of his or her co-self. If matters are not resolved this time, there is always recourse to another meeting next week to do so.

Does it, on the other hand, sound mechanical and rigid, in its



bondage to the clock? Again, one must not be deceived. There's a reason for each nuance, bought with hard experience. And, with attention to time, there's less chance that any member of the body will feel that precious minutes are trespassed on. Sound process means keeping necessary tension in group relations to a real minimum.

Short of a tape recording, one cannot reproduce here on the page the caring ways in which a good community meeting is carried forward, following its own contours to a successful conclusion. I repeat that the closest thing in the experience of most readers would perhaps be the parallel to a Quaker Meeting for Business, or any similar meeting based on the consensus approach.

But I believe that intentional communities, to be successful, must go beyond the style and expectations of an ordinary Quaker-type business meeting. First of all, living and working together on a daily basis means a need for much more responsive sharing of the thoughts and impulses needed for taking action. Each individual must feel that his or her input counts, that the group is not standing in the way of the person moving on the basis of inner need. A monthly meeting can postpone, again and again, a proposed action. A weekly meeting of corporate concern cannot do this without loss and maddening frustration and sometimes death of hopes for living and working together.

Let us now, before I leave the topic of how communities act as a body of many members, name a few applications and extensions. Running an alternative business, for example, has its special problems, and usually means much more delegation and fixing of specific responsibility without losing large-group control. Rotating managers and specialized task groups are one answer.

In really large-scale operations, such as a national network, or in the example of mass action such as the occupation of the

nuclear plant at Seabrook, New Hampshire, some quite intricate devices have evolved. Just one key example of these was the creation of small "affinity groups" which became adept at quick decision making, relaying their decisions to the larger group. At one of the armories where over 600 Seabrook protestors were jailed, the entire group, helped by MNS volunteers and others, was able to make in a few hours complex and vital decisions affecting their total strategy relative to confinement and such-like matters.

### *Shared Leadership*

In a sense, this brings us to the question of leadership in community-related enterprises. I think it can be said with considerable accuracy that the old-style charismatic leader, who embodies his people's wishes and sometimes their very soul, in benevolent, even loving dictatorship, has, for the most part, played out his role and left the stage. Among the exceptions are the guru-led communities, mostly religious, where spiritual power and shrewd material wisdom combine to keep them alive when a really democratic small-society might fail.

Maybe the example of MNS/Life Center in the early days would be instructive. Names such as Taylor, Lakey, Willoughby, Moyer (all male by the way) were prominent in the early 1970's as "leaders" by virtue of their clear vision, ability to inspire, and sound organizational sense. Now, seven and eight years later, while many of these names still appear on committees and as speakers, a new style of collective leadership has emerged. Not needing official "spokesmen" nor people to attract crowds or even to initiate strategy or write papers, the community now distributes this kind of work much more widely between both sexes and at different age levels. Outreach, strategy, and planning groups, comprising often the

wisest and keenest folk but rarely type-cast, have emerged to take over the burden of leadership. And this is happening in communities of many other kinds.

## *Change or Die*

I need to include a final word about the context of change in which these intentional communities are operating. Over the surface of the globe today, the failure of old structures of national power to cope with the accelerating rates of population growth, resource depletion, air, sea and land pollution and consolidations of economic power, is so self-evident as to almost preclude mention. Put another way, institutionalization and politicization of so many social processes seems to stand in the way of what some would call a genuinely "macro-analytic" view of total reality affecting the continuing human presence on earth.

Thus, to "see life steadily and see it whole" is almost impossible today. Yet it is obligatory. One super agency, even a whole raft of transnational agencies, would be one answer, but perhaps an unacceptable one. Yet, even if they were so reconstituted to regulate and control, there would still be a need to return to the salty New England wisdom of Thoreau, which, far from being outdated by time, becomes more relevant with every passing day.

"I learned this," he wrote in *Walden*, "at least by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with success unexpected in common hours. . . . In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. . . . If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost



that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them."

My life in that small part of the Movement for a New Society (itself part of a much larger inchoate movement for change) that happens to be centered in West Philadelphia, has been and is an experiment in a life. It is not just a "life style," but as one chronicler of this movement has called it, a "lifeway"—a way of life.

I also want to make it clear that the single version of community I have presented here is real for me because I have lived it, and that, while I hope it has seemed real to you, I do not put it forward as a final model for anyone else. Most of us, I dare say, share a vision of a community that will embody values we have not achieved in our present organization of society. The end seems good, the means uncertain.

Yet new beginnings are being made, must be made, for as Christopher Fry says in a memorable passage in his *Sleep of Prisoners*: "The time is now when wrong rises up to confront us everywhere." Our lives are all we have to experiment with, and the way is not uncharted.

### *Community As Witness*

I, for one, have turned away from one type of community now widely heralded among the young. It says, "come to us and we'll take you out of the competitive rat-race, where all you need seek is self-realization in a protected environment."

The communities set forth by MNS and in a recently published book by the American Friends Service Committee, *Taking Charge*, do not see themselves so much as utopian models, but rather as a school for a future life of sharing and working together towards a world of peace and justice.

This vision suggests, if it does not say, that God is not to be

sought in the sky, but in everyone engaged in the struggle for what certain prophets used to call (and what we used to believe in, in the early part of this century) the Kingdom of God.

In quite another sense, community is both a means and a goal. Thus, there is something organic in the growth of an intentional community. Caring for each other in a multitude of ways inevitably builds an atmosphere of trust. That is one reason why it is oftentimes so hard to determine whether a community in being and in process ought to wear a "religious" or a "secular" label. If the religious emphasis is implicit and not expressed, is it thereby less "religious" than one so labelled? There is much in these distinctions yet to be clarified.

My life of experimenting (or should I say my experimental life?) is not done. Community is no idle dream for me or for anyone who has ever lived in one, be it loose and free, or somewhat closed and demanding. During my last months at the Life Center, I had the good fortune to participate directly in two weeks of even closer living called a General Training Program. Though we worked hard together we never thought of the long sessions as hard work, but as a special kind of fun.

One of the songs that we learned was "We Can Make the Changes Now," written that week by one of our number. I shall never forget the rapt and solid commitment that gripped us all as we sang it. It is indeed Another Way to Live.

## A READING LIST

- Clearness: Processes for Supporting Individuals and Groups in Decision-making.* By Peter Woodrow. 32 pages, paper, Philadelphia\*
- Commitment and Community.* By Rosabeth Kanter, 303 pages, cloth, Beacon Press, Boston.
- Directory of Communities.* Edited by Jubal. Published annually by the School of Living, Box 3233, York, Pa., 17402.
- Families of Eden: Communes and the New Anarchism.* By Judson Jerome. 320 pages, cloth, Seabury Press, New York.
- Moving Toward a New Society.* By Susanne Gowan, George Lakey, William Moyer, and Richard Taylor. 296 pages, paper, New Society Press, Philadelphia.\*
- Resource Manual for a Living Revolution.* By Virginia Coover, Ellen Deacon, Charles Esser, and Christopher Moore. 389 pages, paper, New Society Press, Philadelphia.\*
- Taking Charge: Achieving Personal and Political Change through Simple Living.* By the Simple Living Collective, San Francisco American Friends Service Committee. 390 pages, paper, Bantam Books, New York.

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\*Available from MNS, 4722 Baltimore Ave., Philadelphia, Pa. 19143.





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